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ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years access to higher education has expanded markedly. Remediation and support programs, including summer bridge programs, have grown in response to the needs of international students, non-English speakers and disabled students, and others who need help in gaining an equal footing with other students. The other main thrust of these programs is to retain these new populations within higher education. The summer programs offer a wide range of activities: academic support, study skills, career counseling, parent involvement, developing relationships on campus, computer literacy, and partnerships with business, communities, and K-12 educators. Individualization of the curricula and programs to the needs of each campus is essential. Every program should begin by developing a mission statement and goals that serve as the foundation of any evaluation, recognizing that it is not usually possible to offer all activities and to serve all populations. Bridge programs are also gaining support internationally, as other countries expand their higher education systems; many are looking to U.S. models, and our institutions need to support and nurture these programs. (RH)

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Summer Bridge Programs: Supporting All Students

Adrianna Kezar

History and Mission

Over the past thirty years, access to higher education has expanded markedly. As in most historical times of expansion, remediation and support programs grow to help new populations make the transition to college. Remediation and support programs grew during the early 1800's when access expanded to include more "common men" in higher education. These programs also grew in the late 1800's when women and blacks entered higher education in larger numbers. Furthermore, after the G.I. Bill and civil rights movement, support programs were again reintroduced to help these new populations attend college.

Over the last thirty years, support programs' goals and mission continue to expand in response to international students, non-English speakers, and disabled students. One of the popular programs that emerged out of these various waves of increased access was the summer bridge program. Summer bridge programs are designed to provide assistance to individuals entering college in the Fall. The focus of programs varies depending on the specific program mission and goals. The main thrust of the programs is to retain these new populations within higher education and to provide them an equal footing with other students.

Range of Activities and Types of Summer Bridge Programs

Program activities range enormously. Some focus almost exclusively on academic support such as writing, mathematics, and reading. Many contain study skills such as time management, individual learning style, study strategies, and expectations for college work. Since students in summer bridge programs are often first generation college students, a section on the goals of a liberal arts education or general education and discussions about college life is included. Also, career counseling is found within the majority of programs, assisting students in expanding their vocational aspirations. Many programs are developing a parent involvement component, since research indicates that parental influence is strongly related to student success. Helping students to develop relationships on campus is another goal; this is accomplished by introducing students to campus offices and potential mentors. In addition, computer literacy is becoming a critical issue within the programs. Journal writing and self-reflective activities have also been identified in the research as important program components.

Many summer bridge programs also develop partnerships within the community to enhance students' experiences. Some bridge programs include community service opportunities so that students meet and are connected with organizations within the area of the college. Others partner with businesses providing future internships possibilities for students. Some programs, for example the University of Missouri, St Louis, have established partnerships with K-12 educators in order to help them in development and evaluation of summer bridge programs.

The populations served by programs vary greatly. Some programs are specifically designed for target populations such as minority, low-income, disabled, or first generation students. Programs are developed for students within particular majors such as math and science. These summer bridge programs tend to have a very different curriculum focused on introducing lab work, understanding what it means to work in the science or math area, familiarizing them with group and problem based learning, and developing mentoring relationships. Other programs serve any student who does not pass an exam, serving more of a remedial purpose. Yet, there are also programs specifically aimed at gifted students, from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs aim more on the transition to college and expectations rather than study skills. Another unique type of program is for students in tech prep high school curriculum. These bridge programs are often offered by community colleges and help students who never aspired to attend college, to enter and finish an associate's degree in a technical area.

Thus, the curricula vary greatly, depending on the population served and goals. Many institutions offer more than one summer bridge program, accommodating the unique needs of their student population. What should become apparent is that individualization of the program to the campus is critical. Conducting an audit of your own campus' needs is essential.

Research to Support the Importance of Summer Bridge Programs

There has been a significant body of research on first generation college students, examining the factors that inhibit and enhance success. This research consistently shows that some of the major barriers to success include: 1) lack of self-confidence; 2) inappropriate expectations or knowledge about college environment; 3) lack of connection to the college community or external community; 4) lack of early validation within the college environment; 5) family members who do not understand the goals of college; and, 6) not involving faculty in summer bridge programs and the transition process (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo, 1996).

Benefits for Students

Little empirical research of programs exist. Some initial studies illustrate that students provide strong ratings for the social aspects of the program such as mentoring, community development, and building self-confidence (York & Stuart). The impact of academic components are rated lower in some self-studies, most likely reflecting that significant progress in academic support is quite difficult in a few weeks or months. This suggests that programs need to be realistic about their goals. However, some programs' students pass entrance exams they were unable to pass prior to the program (Garcia, 1991).

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Studies examining retention and grade point average indicate that students in support programs tend to perform better (GPA) than students who did not receive the same type of support (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996). Few studies have control groups, thus these findings are not conclusive. Studies also illustrate that programs are helpful to transition, but not necessarily retention (York and Tross, 1994). Yet, the results are mixed with some evaluations showing increased retention in successive years (Garcia, 1991). Also, research typically examines one type of program, since programs vary, making generalizations about impact quite difficult. One study examining schools that are high producers of minority science and engineering degree recipients discovered that a component of these colleges' and universities' curriculum is summer bridge programs (Brazziel & Brazziel, 1995). High producers include a range of institutions: Cornell University, University of Oklahoma, University of California-Los Angeles, Arizona State University, Morgan State University, University of Maryland-Baltimore County, and Hampton University.

Model Programs: Individualizing to meet Targeted Campus Needs

A few model programs are described to assist campuses in developing innovative programs. Citations to articles about these programs are provided in the references. The University of Wisconsin offers an ESL/Bilingual Pre-collegiate Program for Southeast Asian refugee high school students. One of the main components of the program is cultural storytelling to build a bridge between self and the new academic setting. Peer counselors are Southeast Asian, providing mentors and role models for students.

Community colleges offer many bridge programs and can be an important sector for identifying models. One model is the Comprehensive Minority SEM Program at Santa Fe Community College that aims at increasing minority involvement and retention in the sciences. The program is extensive, moving beyond the components typically offered (skills development, etc., already mentioned), including support for tuition, books and fees; a faculty mentoring program; an Hispanic organization on campus; specific tutorial labs for students in their first year who complete the summer bridge program; and placement in work study positions in the math department.

Another program designed by the Native American Preparatory School in Rowe, New Mexico focuses more on character development through community service, the arts, and athletics. The school blends Native American and Western beliefs. The program focuses on writing fluency, communication skills, critical thinking skills and computer literacy.

In general, model programs are individualized, have strong faculty support and involvement, are tied to the institutional mission, have partnerships with area K-12 schools, are supported by senior administration, use small group collaborative learning, build community, and conduct student assessment /evaluation.

Evaluation of Programs

Program evaluation is important since many programs find that they are missing a needed component. Since funds are always limited, it is critical to determine the range of activities most important to your particular campus. Although it would be nice to include parent involvement, mentoring, community outreach, study skills, and academic support, it is usually not possible to offer all activities and to all populations you want to serve. In addition to range of activities offered and target population, programs also should examine length of program, schedule, learning approaches used (lecture versus small group learning), technology, involvement of different members of campus and other issues important to program success.

Every program should begin by developing a mission statement and goals, as these are the foundation on any evaluation. There is a very helpful list of such standards for student support services offered by the CAS Council for Academic Standards in Student Support Services. These standards can be obtained from at the following website http://www.ksu.edu/nacada/Profres/standard.htm. In addition, a helpful resource to conducting evaluations was developed by Michael York and Stuart Tross in a paper they presented at the Annual SUCCEED conference on the Improvement of Engineering Education.

Summary

Summer bridge programs will continue to be important as higher education continues to expand, increasing access to more and different populations. Bridge programs are also gaining support internationally as other parts of the world expand their higher education systems. Many countries are looking to the U.S. for models. With the federal government making it a goal that all Americans have the opportunity to attend at least two years of college, institutions need to support and nurture these important programs.

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